SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

The Importance of Vertical Engagement in Village Stability Operations

by Andrew Feitt

A variety of recent media reporting has highlighted the success and challenges of ongoing local engagement initiatives in Afghanistan. Under the banner of Village Stability Operations (VSO), these initiatives are efforts by U.S. Army Special Forces (SF) and other Special Operations Forces (SOF) to improve local governance, security, and infrastructure throughout the country. The current National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Afghanistan suggests that VSO and the associated development of Afghan Local Police (ALP) are proving more effective than many other concurrent Coalition military efforts.[1] Conversely, other reports also reveal that many Afghans harbor serious concerns about some of these ventures, and in particular suggest that the push by senior military and civilian leadership to accelerate many ALP programs may in fact create a local backlash as Coalition forces bypass necessary checks and balances in the clamor for ALP numbers.[2] However, any generalizations about potential success or failure of VSO programs overlook a salient point: the intent of the programs is to engage at a local level and address the specific problems of a local area. Success or failure may look dramatically different between various regions of Afghanistan. Outside audiences should not assume that there is a universal template for successful VSO programs, or that these programs are revolutionary or novel in their approach. Fixating on the term „Village Stability Operations" itself may actually restrict appropriate analysis of local problem sets.

Events in Kandahar Province during late 2010 and early 2011 showed that SOF teams conducting VSO were more likely to achieve identifiable success in improving local governance, security, and infrastructure at the District level rather than at the village, and efforts by those elements to enlist and leverage the support of District and Provincial powerbrokers for VSO provided the necessary kindling to turn notional programs into reality.

The following article will address why focusing myopically on the village level in some areas of Afghanistan is a recipe for stagnation and may in fact be counterproductive to overall efforts at developing enduring local security across a broad base. In a hierarchical environment, an exclusive effort at the village level attempts to create change through engagement of those with no real power or ability to make decisions. Such efforts neglect to account for the vertical allegiance networks that dominate sections of Afghanistan"s south and an agrarian society where large-scale land ownership is a frequent determinant of authority. Secondly, in some environments a focus on one village or community becomes inevitably exclusionary towards neighboring communities, and may instead alienate potential supporters. Such cases may require a more top-down approach involving „vertical" engagement that parallels the Afghan District and Provincial hierarchies above the village level.

[1] "Petraeus Says He"ll Leave Army Behind as CIA Chief," by Kimberly Dozier, Associated Press, June 23, 2011.
[2] "Afghans Wary of Building Up Local Policing Forces," by Quil Lawrence, National Public Radio, January 13, 2011.

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

1. REPORT DATE	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED
01 NOV 2011		**00-00-2011 to 00-00-2011**

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
The Importance of Vertical Engagement in Village Stability Operations	5b. GRANT NUMBER
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)	5d. PROJECT NUMBER
	5e. TASK NUMBER
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **Army 3rd Special Forces Group,Fort Bragg,NC,28310**	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT **unclassified**	b. ABSTRACT **unclassified**	c. THIS PAGE **unclassified**	**Same as Report (SAR)**	**6**	

Characteristics of Kandahar

Afghanistan is not a homogenous country and local engagement will involve markedly different approaches in different regions. Leadership should take care to avoid VSO checklists and eschew common metrics for VSO success. Measures that work well in Kunar Province may not work at all in Kandahar, and a winning tactic in one region may prove detrimental in another. As an example, some VSO teams have attempted to use the term „arbakai" in reference to nascent local security forces, but the word itself conjures vastly different sentiments depending on the region.[3]

On a theoretical level most leadership understands that VSO efforts should hinge on local atmospherics and that there is no single rubric for VSO success. For these reasons, Commanders should appropriately enable operational elements, allowing them to achieve the most comprehensive understanding of their local environments. They must also provide them the leeway to conduct local engagement under the banner of VSO as they see fit without saddling them with arbitrary metrics or excessive oversight. This article is not an argument for abandoning any oversight, but management of ongoing VSO must appreciate local dynamics and not force elements into decisions based on a cookie-cutter model for "what VSO looks like."

In order to mobilize populations behind VSO and ALP, it is often critical to work through unofficial power structures and hierarchies. A wide body of study highlights the importance of patronage networks in Kandahar and the historic role they have played in local politics. The overwhelmingly Pashtun districts of Kandahar Province – particularly those ringing the major urban node of Kandahar City – are largely rural and the economy chiefly dependent on a variety of licit and illicit crops. In such an agrarian society, land ownership frequently confers more authority than a government title or tribal pedigree. In some aspects this type of society and the relationships between landowners and farmers occasionally resembles medieval western Feudalism, though the comparison is far from exact: rural Kandahar lacks the formal, institutional roles of overlord, vassal, and serf that formed the backbone of Western Feudal society.[4]

In the 1980s, Soviet anthropologists examining Afghanistan characterized this type of Pashtun society using the term *rutbavi*. This model is "hierarchical, with a tendency towards feudalistation and usurpation of the power of the tribesmen by the leader; these leaders have the ability to influence the orientation of their followers, either directly or through their representatives, who allow the leader to maintain influence even if he resettles in the city."[5] This paradigm could still describe Kandahar today, as the last three decades of instability in Afghanistan have only thickened these hierarchical lines. Successive Soviet and Taliban campaigns directly targeted leaders at a local level, which in turn caused local populations to become increasingly reliant on strongmen at higher echelons of society.[6]

---

[3] For more on conflicting views towards arbakai, see: "Local Defence in Afghanistan" by Mathieu Lefevre, Afghanistan Analysts Network Thematic Report, March 2010.
[4] For more on the similarities and differences between Afghan patronage and western Feudalism, see**:** "Tribes and Warlords in Southern Afghanistan, 1980-2005" by Antonio Giustozzi and Noor Ullah, Crisis States Research Centre.
[5] Giustozzi and Noor Ullah.
[6] "My Cousin"s Enemy is My Friend: A Study of Pashtun „Tribes" in Afghanistan," TRADOC G2 Human Terrain System, United States Army, September 2009.

Consequently, by 2010 a number of powerful men controlled a disproportionate amount of the land in rural Kandahar, either directly or by proxy. The Taliban Insurgency, and its recent dominance of many of Kandahar"s outlying districts, compelled many of these landowners to seek refuge within the relative safety of Kandahar City. Nevertheless, the landowners" ability to exercise some control and influence over their holdings remained despite their physical absence.

The „Horn" of Panjwai[7], a rich agricultural region to the west of Kandahar City, provided an example of these enduring relationships between land-owning patrons and their clients. The Insurgency enjoyed *de facto* control of the Horn from 2007 due to the minimal (and at times nonexistent) Coalition and Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) presence. In the fall of 2010, a combined campaign returned control of the Horn to the Afghan government (officially known as the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, or GIRoA). But when Coalition forces attempted to gauge popular support in the Horn for the establishment of local security forces as a precursor to ALP, they discovered that residents preferred to remain on the fence and defer any decision on local security to the area's major landowners. These landowners had yet to return to the Horn, and the local population tended to resist the Coalition's calls to stand up and arm themselves until they could do so under the auspices of these authority figures.

As a result, the Panjwai District government adopted an approach which relied upon pre-existing patron/client relationships rather than attempting to recruit local village forces spontaneously. The District Governor convened a meeting, designated ALP leaders for each region of Panjwai, and charged each to recruit a set number of local police using their own surrogates. A significant number of these designated ALP commanders were themselves prominent landlords.

These circumstances were not unique to Panjwai. In Khakrez District, a large segment of the local population refused to consider any development of the ALP program due to the rumored opposition of one of the District"s chief land barons, a key ally of the Karzai family who resided in Kandahar City. A physical visit by the official, and his vocal support for ALP, were necessary to dispel these rumors as bogus. Similar cases presented themselves in several other districts across the Province, and were testament to the implicit authority that land ownership and its accompanying access to wealth and resources conferred on a select few individuals.

The Possibility of Exclusion and Intimidation

Beyond the specifics of Kandahar, there are other factors that may support a broader, vertical approach to local engagement. While all current VSO programs are in rural Afghanistan, the term „rural Afghanistan" is an umbrella description covering many different types of local communities. Villages may be spread far apart or clustered within a several kilometer radius. Where close, the communities generally share some links of a familial, tribal, or economic nature. The level varies by community, but in many cases the ties may be competitive rather than mutually beneficial. In such cases, a parochial focus on a village may exacerbate pre-existing rivalries between that village and adjacent communities or foster new rivalries over competition for Coalition dollars and development projects.

There is the chance that a competing community may look to a neighboring village with a successful VSO program and petition for an effort within their own community. But it is also

[7] The „Horn" of Panjwai receives its name due to its geographic shape. The land gradually narrows to a point from the eastern limit of Sperwan Ghar to the confluence of the Arghandab and Dowry rivers in the west.

possible that the community may perceive a SOF presence within a neighboring village as implicit Coalition support for their historic rivals, and such endemic rivalry may drive the competing village to seek aid from the Insurgency as a counterweight. Perhaps most dangerous is the possibility that empowering one community at the expense of others would cause the supported village, flush with Coalition patronage, to begin behaving in a predatory manner towards their neighbors. Such a scenario could de-legitimize the entire VSO program in the eyes of locals and the media.

Conflict with neighboring communities is only one of the potential byproducts of a narrow focus on a particular village. The presence and attention of Coalition Forces at one location is likely to draw additional insurgent presence and attention, making that VSO site a magnet for attacks. This can even be a benefit when it causes hostile fighters to emerge and engage in a contest where Coalition Forces can employ superior firepower. But this assumes a stupid, desperate, or suicidal enemy. It is far more likely that the insurgents will resort to their historically successful and less visible tactics of intimidation: the posting of night letters explicitly threatening villagers who support the VSO program or enroll as ALP, beatings or kidnapping of local residents who cooperate with CF or ANSF, and the assassination of anti-insurgent leaders. The promise of these threats have deterred many locals from embracing VSO and caused village leaders to adamantly refuse any requests by SOF teams to embed in their community.

The Role of the District

In addition to cultural and local considerations, there are other practical reasons to focus above the village level when conducting VSO. From a civil affairs perspective, engagement of the District Governor and his staff is crucial to initiate and maintain development projects. For one, this allows the District Government to present itself to the local population as a legitimate source of authority with the ability and resources to improve infrastructure. A District Governor is often the most immediate and conspicuous face of GIRoA to individual communities. Even if a project occurs primarily at a village level, the District Government‟s involvement helps to bridge the gap between a village and the District, and by proxy the Afghan government as a whole.

In the contemporary environment, District Centers also provide access to additional enablers and outside organizations that can augment development activities. These combined military and civilian District Support Teams (DSTs) provide both the District Government and VSO teams with the ability to draw on outside aid and expertise to support their endeavors.[8]

Engagement with District officials during VSO also can make the District leadership a more effective force for adjudicating disputes. One of the chief advantages enjoyed by the Taliban Insurgency in much of rural Afghanistan is their accessible and responsive system of traveling courts. Disputes in many Afghan communities involve land ownership, access to water, electricity, or other property issues. Taliban courts often provide a ready and efficient method for resolving those differences, rooted in traditional Islamic law. Even the loser of an argument can accept the results as fair. When a population‟s best recourse for dispute resolution is to the Taliban, they begin to perceive the Insurgency as a more legitimate source of authority than the nominal Afghan government. GIRoA judicial representation is frequently non-existent

[8] "Development in Eastern Afghanistan: Keys to Success," by SGT Spencer Case, ISAF Press Release, May 31, 2010.

at the District level, and even when in place is often corrupt. In the absence of official legal entities, the mantle of dispute resolution often falls to the District leadership. Successful VSO can approach this from both sides: encouraging local villages to take their issues to the District Governor for adjudication, and concurrently mentoring the Governor to ensure he is performing his duties with appropriate rectitude.

Engagement of District officials also allows VSO teams to positively influence their behavior. In some cases a District Governor or Chief of Police may be ill-suited to serve as the visible face of the Afghan government. Only through interaction can CF attempt to shape an official"s attitude or identify whether further action is necessary to precipitate their removal.

Lastly, it is important to note that engagement in support of VSO involves more than just Afghan officials. In nearly all cases, the VSO team is operating in an area occupied by a conventional Battle-Space Owner (BSO). These Company, Battalion, and Brigade Commanders have formalized relationships of their own with District and Provincial officials. This makes it vital for the VSO team to coordinate their engagement plan with the BSO to avoid presenting contradictory or redundant messages. So long as the team"s approach is in tandem with that Commander"s intent, these BSO partnerships can be extremely beneficial to VSO development as they provide a separate medium to influence the behavior of Afghan leadership. BSOs may also have access to additional resources, money, or reconstruction aid that can be highly persuasive in mobilizing local support for improvements in security or governance that dovetail with the VSO team"s own efforts.

The Dangers of Arbitrary Metrics

Certainly, the local characteristics of one province and its reception of VSO do not represent the whole of Afghanistan. On the contrary, readers should greet with extreme skepticism any approach towards VSO that claims to be universal. The phrase: "If you"ve seen one VSO site, you"ve seen one VSO site," illustrates the inherent uniqueness behind each local effort. Instead of relying on one generic formula, an operational element conducting VSO must apply their own analysis to identify specific local characteristics and determine the best means to address local grievances.

There should be concern that the VSO concept will develop into operational dogma. Even while referencing the axiom above, senior leadership will naturally trend towards imposing checklists for VSO development in their efforts to expedite the process and evaluate progress. Leaders should be particularly cautious about placing arbitrary emphasis on "embedding" in villages or quickly validating ALP without appropriate regard for local conditions. This creates "paper" ALP which satisfies political demand for tangible development in local security but may prove detrimental to the program in the long-term. The incessant demand for more ALP numbers means a hasty recruitment of local policemen without the time for a proper vetting of their background and allegiances. It also raises the real danger that local gangs or sectarian groups may line up to receive ALP certification and then resume preying on villagers with the added weight of official government sanction.

For many of the reasons above, Village Stability Operations conducted by small SOF teams in varied, complex, and frequently remote and austere environments are among the most challenging and potentially valuable political and military efforts ongoing in Afghanistan today. But to look solely at the village is, in some cases, missing the big picture and ignoring the true

drivers of local behavior. Instead, Coalition Forces must appropriately assess the local environment, and where necessary match efforts at the village level with concurrent attention to District and Provincial leadership. In some areas of Afghanistan – particularly those where traditional systems are based in land ownership and patronage relationships – those efforts at higher echelons assume even greater importance.

Captain Andrew R. Feitt is an active duty Military Intelligence officer in the U.S. Army. Between 2009 and 2011, he deployed twice to southern Afghanistan with 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne). The opinions in this article are his own and do not reflect those of the U.S. Army or any other organization.